

# Reflecting On Events That Lead To Students Activism in Kenyan Secondary Schools: Intervention and Prevention

Lewis Muli Ngesu

*University of Nairobi, Kenya*

**Abstract:** Throughout history, student activism and violence has been a major issue interpreted in various ways reflecting different ideological, social and political orientations. There is a general academic consensus concerning the empirical facts of increasing students' violence in Kenya, however the questions about the causes of the increase has been more controversial. This study investigated the events leading to students' violence in Kenyan secondary school. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The target population comprised of head teachers and teachers. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data was analysed using Statistical Package of Social Sciences software programme version 21. The study established that there are unique events that may lead to students' violence and efforts to minimise them vary across the different schools in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Students activism, Violence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Student militancy as a worldwide phenomenon in Africa largely since the 1960's is just a subject of a much older and wider "youth phenomenon" dating as far back as the middle ages, as widely across Europe as France, Italy, Germany and England where the movement initially confined itself within the university campuses and centered on disobedience of authority (for example the king and his delegates) and on refusal to be disciplined (Hobbes in Lipset and Altbach 1969: v). According to Ishumi (1976), the growth and development of public schools increased the number of students who were open to the realities of life outside their private home; they had access to an increasing range of ideas and literature, had a wider choice of alternatives and a correspondingly larger number of possibilities of independent action. The forms of action have varied widely, depending on the prevailing circumstances, but they all have ushered in a dimension of tension, insecurity, instability and a spell of "unpeaceful" relations with the wider society (Ishumi, 1976). According to Cohen (2005), student strike is a disruptive behaviour which interferes with the learning development or happiness of a pupil and other members of society. Such eruptions or else activism pose a threat to the country as well as harming the process of moulding the youth (Cohen, 2005, Ngesu 2011). The student struggle in North America has on the one hand directed its thrust at the injustices and imbalances in the socio-economic structure, seeking to redress

the inequalities and institute fairness in the access to and distribution of life chances and opportunities (Ishumi, 1976).

On the African scene, student crises have not been less noticeable. Since the mid-1960's and more intensively in 1970's, nearly every African country has in one way or another experienced a shake up by student outbreaks as is evident in Egypt, Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Congo, Zaire, South Africa, Kenya and Ethiopia, to mention a few around the map (Ishumi, 1976). In the mid-seventies for example, the Nigerian Government became quite concerned about what was described as indiscipline among pupils. The Federal Government showed the extent of the concern when it decided to post soldiers to all post-primary institutions from January 1978. These were to assist the principals and staff with disciplinary problems in the school and provide an example of military discipline to emulate (Sifuna, 2000). General Obasanjo, then the military head of state gave an example of what was to be expected when he personally caned a pupil while touring a school because of the pupils' shabby appearance and the disrespectful way in which he answered a question (Sifuna 2000).

A study carried out by Mabitla (2006) in South Africa on the causes and manifestation of aggression among secondary school learners established that families should nurture their children's lives, prescribing norms and values that should be respected. The study further established that children should be taught that conflict is never resolved through anger as is a precursor to violence. The study concluded that there is need to recognize the prevalence of aggression in schools. The study recommended that the government should design programmes for learners who are at high risk to perpetrate aggression. The programmes should include: a zero tolerance policy, profiling potentially aggressive learners, peer mediation, physical surveillance and conflict resolution.

Closer home, Yego (2008) points out that the Kenyan educational system experienced unprecedented number of strikes in 1974. According to Yego (2008) the educational system experienced sixty-nine secondary school strikes, two technical schools, two university strikes and one teaching training college although the number of strikes may have been more than the cases reports because of the unwillingness of head teachers to report cases of indiscipline. According to

Kinyajui (1976), the consequences of such behaviour may include incidences of rape, violence, disobedience to school authority and damage to school property. Research findings by (NCCK: 1992) on student activism in schools and colleges revealed that the youth suffer from a condition commonly referred to as identity crisis.

Being at adolescent stage of human growth and development, most of them turn to rebellious actions such as smoking and drug abuse due to peer influence. They lose their self-image and respect thus engaging in inappropriate behaviour which includes strikes, homosexuality and student militancy. Kaluku, Cheloti & Maithya (2020) on influence of head teachers’ administrative practices on management of students’ discipline in public secondary schools in Machakos Sub-County, Kenya established that the causes of students were multi-faceted, unpleasant and called for prompt responses from the key players and actors from the education sector. The study recommends that head teachers should involve parents when formulating school rules and regulations in order to promote closer links between home and school.

II. DISCUSSION OF THE MAJOR FINDINGS

*Acts of Indiscipline behaviours that lead to student militancy and even violence*

In addressing this issue, data on acts of indiscipline behaviours that lead to student militancy in secondary schools were collected from the responses of students, headteachers, focus group discussions and education administrators and analysed with the use of percentages. The variables on which scores were made include included absconding from school, fighting amongst students, theft of school property, refusing to perform cleaning duties, refusal to do home work, drug taking, attending class late, consumption of alcohol, refusing to put on school uniform while going out, bullying fellow student, playing with objects when lessons are on, striking against the school administration, arson activities, teacher-student sexual relations, poor teacher-student interpersonal relation, killing of student, embezzlement of school fund, threatening of students, ethnicity from students, fear of exams, boycotting of meals and boy-girl sexual relation. Table 1 shows the findings.

Table 1: Acts of indiscipline behaviours that lead to student militancy

Violence Indicators	N	%
Absconding from school	172	8.7
Fighting amongst students	167	8.4
Theft of school property	164	8.3
Refusing to perform cleaning duties	159	8.0
Refusal to do home work	142	7.1
Drug taking (smoking bhang and cigarette	140	7.0
Attending classes late	135	6.8
Consumption of alcohol	132	6.6
Refusal to put on school uniform while g	113	5.7
Bullying fellow students	107	5.4

Playing with objects when lessons are in	86	4.3
Being shabby	85	4.3
Boycotting classes	75	3.8
Striking against the school administration	69	3.5
Arson activities e.g. burning of dormitory	59	3.0
Teachers-students' sexual relations	47	2.4
Poor teacher-student interpersonal relation	42	2.1
Killing of students	30	1.5
Embezzlement of school fees	17	0.9
Threatening students	15	0.8
Ethnicity from students	10	0.5
Fear of exams	9	0.5
Boycotting of meals	7	0.4
Boy-girl sexual relations	5	0.3
Total responses	1987	100.0

In Table 1, the total percentage of responses adds to more than 100% because the question required multiple responses. 8.7% of the respondents felt that absconding from school was a serious and a rampant problem, so it was ranked number one. Fighting amongst students, theft of school property, refusal to perform cleaning duties, refusal to do home work, drug taking, attending classes late and consumption of alcohol were also ranked high in relation to the frequency in the students’ questionnaires. Their percentage rated 8.4% to 6.6%.

Students perceived refusal to put on school uniform, bullying fellow students, playing with objects when lessons are on and being shabby as among moderate acts of indiscipline behaviours within the study location that could lead to student militancy. Their percentage rated 5.7% to 4.3%.

According to students perception, boycotting classes, striking against the school administration, arson activities, teacher-student sexual relations, poor teacher-student interpersonal relation, killing of students, embezzlement of school fees, threatening of student, ethnicity from students, fear of exams, boycotting of meals and boys-girls sexual relations were least rampant with percentage falling between 3.8% to 0.3 %.

A similar question with heads of secondary schools revealed similar trends to acts of students’ indiscipline behaviours, which lead to student militancy and even violence. A similar methodology was employed in this study, although the number of respondents at 16 was smaller. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Prevalent student act indiscipline in Machakos as perceived by Head teachers

Prevalent student acts of Indiscipline	Count	% Responses	% Cases
Sneaking from school/absconding	11	12.4	68.8
Fighting amongst students	9	10.1	56.3
Refusal to put on school uniform while going out of school	9	10.1	56.3

Refusing punishment from teachers	8	9	50
Attending classes late	7	7.9	43.8
Bullying of fellow students	6	6.7	37.5
Drug taking: drinking alcohol, smoking bhang and cigarettes	6	6.7	37.5
Refusal to do home work	6	6.7	37.5
Boycotting classes	5	5.6	31.3
Theft of school property	5	5.6	31.3
Striking against the school administration	5	5.6	31.3
Being shabby	4	4.5	25
Arson activities e.g. burning of dormitories	2	2.2	12.5
Assaulting teachers	2	2.2	12.5
Sexual relations with teachers	2	2.2	12.5
Political influence	1	1.1	6.3
Negative attitude	1	1.1	6.3
Raping female students	0	0	0
Killing teachers and head teachers	0	0	0
Killing of students	0	0	0
Total responses	89	99.7	556.7

The respondents in Table 2 above add to more than 100% because the questions required multiple responses from the respondents. The head teacher identified 17 acts of indiscipline they perceived as prevalent in the district. Absconding from school ranked position one with 68.8%; while in the student responses it was ranked position one with 8.7%. Other acts of student indiscipline which were directly or indirectly related to absconding from school include fighting among students, refusal to put on school uniform while going out and refusing punishment from teachers. They were highly rated and ranged 56.3% to 50.0%.

According to head teacher's perception, student's indiscipline cases directly related to teaching-learning processes included attending classes late, bullying of fellow student, drug taking, and refusal to do homework, boycotting classes, theft of school property and striking against school administration. The percentage ranked 43.3 % to 37.5%.

Being shabby, arson activities, assaulting teachers, sexual relations with teachers, political influence and negative attitude were less rampant with percentage falling between 25.0% and 6.3 %.

From the two Tables, it can be observed that the head teachers and students perception on student indiscipline was similar with small variations in the responses. The above findings are corroborated by evidence gathered from focus group discussion and interview schedules. It was observed that the following acts of student's behaviour could lead to student militancy and even acts of violence: Absconding from school, arson activities, assaulting of teachers, theft of school

property, rape/Sodomy against fellow students, killing of fellow students, drug abuse, love affairs between student and teachers and unwanted pregnancy in case of rape.

Similar studies conducted on acts of student behaviour reveal the same trend. Mutie (2004) conducted a research on attitudes of secondary school head teachers towards guidance and counselling as a disciplinary tool: A case study of central Division, Machakos District. In his finding the researcher identified the following acts of student indiscipline that were most dominant and likely to lead to students activism. These were attending classes late, disrespect to teachers, absconding from school, drugs abuse, destruction of school property and fighting between students.

From the above findings it is clear that the most rampant form of indiscipline was attending classes late and disrespect to parents was the rarest because it happens away from school and rarely do parents report their children to school for indiscipline but occasionally report especially when they need the assistance of the school because of gross indiscipline back at home from their children (Ndetei, 2007).

#### *Acts of Student Activism by Gender*

The analysis presented in Table 3 shows the most prevalent acts of students behaviours by gender. 40.7% of the females cited fighting among students and absconding from school respectively while male student rated fighting among students at 29.6% and absconding from school at 31.5%. Theft of school property and refusal to do homework was rated at 38.5% by female students while males rated theft of school property at 30.9% and refusal to do homework at 21.8%. Refusal to perform cleaning duties was agreed at 39.5% by female students. This could be seen to contradict the fact that only 28% of male student cited refusal to perform cleaning duties.

Attending classes late was rated at 36.2% by female students with males rating it at 21.0%. There was no significant differences between the gender of students and consumption of alcohol. For instance, while 27.6% of the female cited consumption of alcohol, 28.0% cited the same act of violence. Equally, female students rated drug taking at 28.8% and males at 30.5%.

The findings suggest that there are no differences between acts of student behaviour and gender. The differences lie in the frequencies these acts are used. Looking at these figures, it could be seen that drug taking and consumption of alcohol was common among both sexes and more females than boys were seen to prefer fighting amongst themselves, stealing of school property, absconding from school and refusal to do homework among others. These findings seem to suggest that female students are becoming more aggressive and the use of alcohol; the most accessible drug to secondary students, often produces psychomotor stimulation effects that lead to increases in sensation seeking and impulsivity, as well as increases in confrontational and provocative behaviour.

Table 3: Student Acts of Behaviour by Gender

Students acts of behaviours	Gender			
	M		F	
	N	%	N	%
Arson activities e.g. burning of dormitories etc	24	9.9	35	14.4
Fighting amongst students	72	29.6	99	40.7
Boycotting classes	28	11.5	50	20.6
Theft of school property	75	30.9	93	38.3
Refusal to put school uniform when going out	55	22.6	62	25.5
Refusing to perform cleaning duties	68	28.0	96	39.5
Being shabby	29	11.9	60	24.7
Playing with objects when lessons are in progress	32	13.2	55	22.6
Striking against the school administration	35	14.4	35	14.4
Attending classes late	51	21.0	88	36.2
Bullying of fellow students	50	20.6	57	23.5
Drug taking (smoking bhang and cigarettes)	74	30.5	70	28.8
Consumption of alcohol	68	28.0	67	27.6
Absconding from school	77	31.7	99	40.7
Refusal to do home work	53	21.8	93	38.3
Killing of students	12	4.9	18	7.4
Teacher-students' sexual relations	25	10.3	23	9.5
Fear of exams	2	0.8	3	1.2
Ethnicity from students	3	1.2	7	2.9
Embezzlement of school fees	8	3.3	9	3.7
Poor teacher-student interpersonal relations	26	10.7	17	7.0
Boy-girl sexual relations	1	0.4	4	1.6
Boycotting of meals	4	1.6	3	1.2
Imperial to other students	7	2.9	9	3.7

*Pragmatic Intervention*

Students' perceptions on pragmatic intervention against student militancy in schools were varied. 29.69% strongly agreed that showing understanding and tolerance was crucial in preventing student militancy. 21.29% considered strengthening of religious institutions, with an almost significant number calling for establishment of regular channels through which students could air their grievances (19.98%). Guidance and counselling was rated at 17.09%, punishment of wrong-doers rated at 11.76%, while a minority of students considered enlisting the support of the community (0.28%) as listed in Table 4 and further illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 4: Pragmatic measures against student militancy in schools as perceived by Students

Pragmatic intervention	N	%
Showing understanding/tolerance	106	29.69
Strengthening religious institutions	76	21.29
Establishing regular channels through which students could air their grievances	71	19.89
Guidance and counselling	61	17.09
Punishment of wrong-doers	42	11.76
Enlisting the support of the community	1	0.28
Total responses	357	100.00

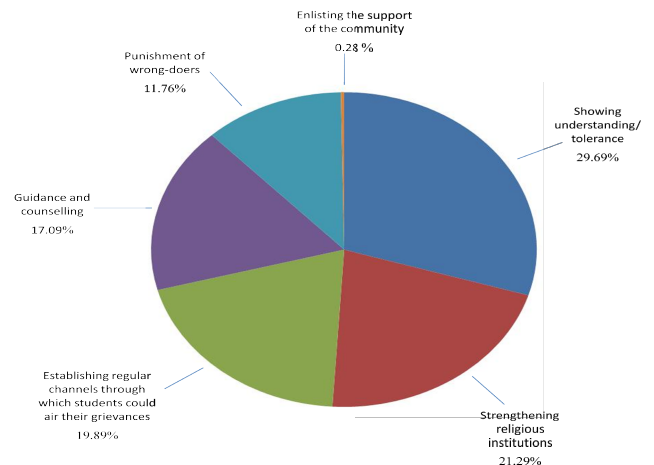


Figure 1 Pragmatic measures against student militancy in schools as perceived by Students

The measures identified by head teachers to address the problem of student militancy included guidance and counselling (24.3%), enlisting support of the community (13.5%), involving students in major decisions of the school and punishment of wrong-doers (8.1%).

The other common pragmatic measures against student militancy cited by head teachers were compulsory religious education (5.4%) and training of head teachers as counsellors (5.4%), as well as abolishing of strenuous examinations, addressing drug abuse in society, stakeholders playing their role well, making government policy on school management publicly clear, urging leaders and parents to be good role models, posting head teachers out of their home districts, promoting teachers on merit, reviewing of the curriculum, stopping rating of schools and using qualified counsellors in schools which were rated at 2.7%.

The findings seem to suggest that the efficacy of guidance and counselling can be strengthened through the use of other methods such as enlisting the support of the community. Guidance and counselling is not the only solution to indiscipline in schools. Community participation was highlighted as important in arresting student militancy. This information is supported by findings gathered from focus group discussions with parents and community leaders, as

well as from interview with educational administrators. The research conducted by Mutie in 2004 does corroborate this as well.

### III. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that student militancy is prevalent in Kenyan secondary schools though the magnitude of violent behaviour varied across geographical pattern. The causes are varied and complex. Some circumstances however encourage student militancy more than others do. The simultaneity of the outbursts and similarities in style and tactics of the student militancy indicate that there is a countrywide revolt of the youth which is not new historically, and which derives from a single set of causes. The current state of student militancy in Kenyan secondary schools reflects a complicated combination of past history and recent stresses on individuals, schools and community marked by deep inequities, massive uncertainties and change within school administration. These acts of indiscipline when not addressed and solutions found may lead to increased student militancy.

### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

School managers therefore are faced with situations in which effective and efficient school management requires new and improved skills, knowledge and attitudes to cope with a wide range of new demands and changes. The Ministry of Education should provide education managers with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes through a development and training programme so that they can manage their schools effectively and efficiently.

There is need for the continual sensitization of society regarding education and its benefits to the individual and the entire society. Parenting is one responsibility that should not be delegated. A safe school is a community effort and partners in the campaign should include educators, parents, police, government officials and other community agencies (the church and wider society) with an interest in youth.

Pastoral care programmes ought to be enhanced in all public schools and be handled by trained religious personnel who are able to relate the teaching with its moral implication. These programmes are meant for the prevention and intervention in

the learners' militant behaviour and should target both militant students and all others affected by student militancy.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Anderson, J (1970). *The struggle for schools*. London: Longman
- [2] Cohen, N (2005). Students living within violent conflict: Should Art educators play it safe or face difficult knowledge? *Studies in Art Education*, 46(4) 309-322.
- [3] Ishumi, A.G (1976). "Student Activism on The Educational Scene: An Historical and Sociological profile". *Utafiti, Journal of the Arts and Social Sciences*. (1),2 189-208.
- [4] Ishumi, A.G (1990) "Educational Development in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Critical Review of Policy and Practice, 1960s-80s." Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economics.
- [5] Kaluku, E. Cheloti, S. & Maithya, R (2020). Parental involvement as determinant factor in managing students discipline in Kenya: assessing the status in public secondary schools in Machakos County. *International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management*, 8(11) 136-150.
- [6] Kinyanjui, P (1975). *Secondary School Strikes: The Art of Blaming the Victim*. Working paper NO.208 Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi.
- [7] Lispet, S. & P. Altbach (1969). *Student in Revolt*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- [8] Mabitla, A (2006). Causes and manifestations of aggression among secondary school learners. Un Published M. Ed Thesis, University of South Africa.
- [9] Ministry of Education (1999). *Report of Inquiry into Educational Systems in Kenya*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.
- [10] Mutie, M. (2004). *Attitudes of Secondary School Head Teachers towards Guidance and Counseling as a Disciplinary Tool: A Case Study of Central Division, Machakos District*. Un Published M. Ed Thesis, University of Nairobi.
- [11] National Council of Churches of Kenya (1992). *A Report on Student Unrest in Kenya Schools*. Nairobi: Uzima press.
- [12] Ndeti, P. (2002). *The Kyanguli Secondary School Fire Tragedy*. Unpublished M.A Thesis. University of Nairobi.
- [13] Ndeti, D. (2007). Bullying in Public Secondary Schools in Nairobi, Kenya. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. 19 (1), 45-55.
- [14] Ngesu, L (2011). Student militancy in secondary schools in Kenya: A sociological analysis of its manifestations, causes and consequences. Published PhD thesis, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- [15] Sifuna, D. N (2000). Education for Democracy and Human Rights in African Schools: The Kenyan Experience. *African Development*, Vol. Nos. 1&2, pp.215-239.
- [16] Yego, A. (2008). Factors influencing school strikes in Central division, Laikipia District. Un Published M.Ed. Thesis, University of Nairobi.